

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words: Engaging Kinesthetic and Multimodal Learners of Economics using Contemporary Films

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Abstract

This author delineates an alternative to traditional textbook teaching of economics: using contemporary films to bring concepts and practices to life.

My interest in finding new ways of reaching students led me to explore the idea of teaching economics through contemporary films. Economics relies heavily on graphical and mathematical analysis, tools which many students find difficult to use. As a result, students are often intimidated rather than stimulated by the prospect or process of learning economics. If their interest and intuition are not engaged, they are unlikely to pursue additional courses after such an unpleasant first experience, and/or they may retain only memorized information after the final exam. In addition, although different students learn best through hearing, seeing, or doing, economics has been slow to adopt non-traditional teaching methods. Economics teaching – perhaps even more than other disciplines – remains slanted towards those who learn best through the traditional, academic, read-write mode, tending to exclude or discourage those with alternate learning styles.

The Choice to Use Films

The use of films as a supplement in economics courses addresses the concerns I have just raised. First, film is a powerful and engaging visual and audio medium for transmitting information. Second, complex and sometimes puzzling economic concepts can be more easily digested by kinesthetic learners who benefit from examples, which can then be reinforced through class discussion. Concepts can be introduced through book or lecture mode, reinforced through film, and then followed by discussion. Third, students' intuition and imagination are engaged through relating the concepts that they have learned by reading or attending lectures to the "real life" depicted in the movies. Thus stimulated, students move toward intellectual ownership of the material, implying long-term retention of economic concepts.

I use contemporary or "popular" films rather than "educational" ones for several reasons. First, popular films have a higher probability of engaging students' interest; second, the cost is lower; and, third, they are widely available.

Recommended Films

<i>Dirty Pretty Things</i>	<i>Boiler Room</i>
<i>Mondays in the Sun</i>	<i>Trading Places</i>
<i>Roger and Me</i>	<i>A Civil Action</i>
<i>Norma Rae</i>	<i>The Insider</i>
<i>Bread and Roses</i>	<i>Runaway Jury</i>
<i>You've Got Mail</i>	<i>9 to 5</i>
<i>Tucker: The Man and his Dream</i>	<i>Disclosure</i>
<i>Other People's Money</i>	<i>Silkwood</i>
<i>Wall Street</i>	<i>The Mission</i>
	<i>Middle Passage</i>

Popular films are more likely to appeal to kinesthetic learners since the economic concepts are fully imbedded in the movie plotline, rather than simply tacked on as examples (which can be the case with many teaching-style or lecture-oriented videos, such as those that accompany textbooks.) Documentary films, while they do not suffer from this particular weakness, do as a whole tend to be less engaging because they are "drier" than more "action-oriented" popular movies.

Concerning cost, many educational videos are unavailable for rental, and purchase prices can exceed \$100 for each film. Even

the relatively lower cost PBS videos range from \$20 to \$50 each, may require special ordering, and have a relatively small distribution. In contrast, the films in my economics and movies syllabus can be rented for as little as \$3.99 at local video stores. The selected movies engage students through their storylines, but in the process, valuable economic lessons are learned.

When my grant proposal “A Picture is Worth A Thousand Words: Teaching Economics Through Contemporary Films” was awarded the Northern Virginia Community College adjunct faculty professional development grant in January 2004, ¹ I developed a website that provides faculty or students access to my selections of movies, as well as the ability to download discussion questions and movie reviews. For example, *Roger and Me* (1989) and *Mondays in the Sun* (2003) illustrate the economic consequences of recession and structural unemployment. Tucker: *The Man and his Dream* (1988) and *You’ve Got Mail* (1998) illustrate strategic behavior of oligopolies and contrasting market structures. *Norma Rae* (1979) and *Bread and Roses* (2001) show the changing face of labor unions and supplement labor union graphs as well as discussions on globalization.

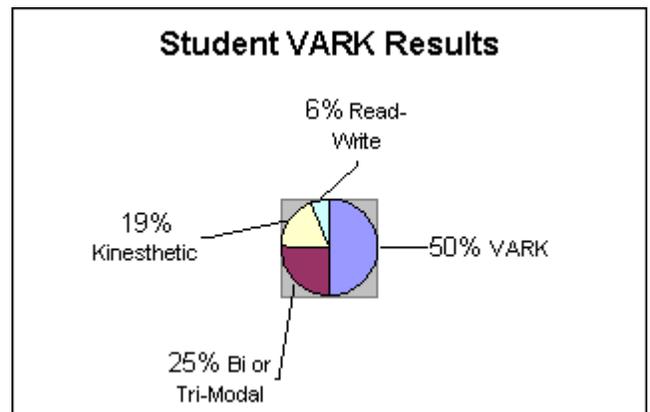
Discovering Learning Styles: VARK Assessments

Following completion of my grant-funded project, I – along with other grant recipients – presented our projects at the Faculty Cross-Campus Day at Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale Campus, on January 6, 2005. The common theme of the projects was helping students to discover their learning styles and adapting classroom activities to engage students with kinesthetic and multimodal learning styles.² My project, as mentioned earlier, focused on teaching economics through contemporary films. Laura Shulman, instructor of religion, developed a website on active learning strategies for students of religion. Abby Hassler of the NVCC Medical Education Center performed VARK assessments for physical therapy students and developed a course designed to allow students to grasp the material kinesthetically, as well as to perform to their strengths in their other required courses.

The VARK questionnaire assesses preferences for taking in and putting out information in a learning context.³ Learning preferences are grouped into visual (V), aural (A), read-write (R) and kinesthetic (K). Significant differences between faculty and students exist regarding their proportions of read-write and kinesthetic results. The faculty’s results tend to be more read-write, whereas students’ results tend to be more kinesthetic. For both groups, the proportions with visual and aural preferences are relatively similar. Despite varieties in learning preferences, most colleges and universities require students to deliver information in read-write mode. Classes emphasize learning through reading, and students must present evidence of their mastery of material via exams and papers. Therefore, it would not be surprising if students fortunate enough to possess read-write styles experience greater academic success. Given the open enrollment policy of community colleges, those attending community college tend – even more than the overall college population – to have styles other than read-write.

In terms of overall results from VARK assessments, approximately 58 percent of the population assesses as multimodal, meaning they could have two or three strong preferences in any combination, or be almost evenly split among the four.⁴ Those with multimodal preferences may need to use more than one strategy for learning in order to feel they have truly grasped the material. Out of the single learning styles, kinesthetics make up the largest proportion (18 percent), followed by read-write (16 percent), aural (5 percent), and visual (3 percent).

In the spring of 2005, I administered a VARK assessment to principles-of-economics-level students at Northern Virginia Community College. Given the small sample size, these are obviously indicative only. Out of 32 students who took the assessment, 16, or 50 percent, were VARK (four modes), and 8, or 25 percent, were bi- or tri-modal. So, the total number of multimodal students was 75 percent. For single preference, 6 of the students, or 18.75 percent, were kinesthetic, and only 2 or 6.25 percent were read-write. None were visual.⁵



Addressing Common Objections

It was gratifying to learn, after 10 years of teaching, that there was a reason for the disconnect I often felt with students that had little to do with personality, and much to do with learning styles. It solved what has been for many years a puzzle to me: the fact that I consistently receive positive evaluations from students who nevertheless show clearly through their exam results that they are completely failing to grasp the material. Perhaps they have been trained from early on in academics not to expect anything more than a lecture (through which they can sit passively), and, if they are lucky enough to have good memories, squeak by through giving a “notes dump” on the exam.

Currently, I am experimenting with moving out of the lecture mode and into the doing mode with students. I use movie viewing,

small and large group discussions, and problem solving in small groups. I find that it requires a bit of courage to come down from the podium and mix with students on a one-to-one basis. It requires me to take off my “expert hat” and say “let’s take a look at this together” – and to be open rather than on the defensive when students come up with their own real-world examples to challenge the conventional wisdom of the textbook, or even more threatening, of the lecturer.

It also requires me to explore (and perhaps discard) some of my preconceived notions about using movies and discussion groups in class. Let’s examine a few common objections to using non-lecture modes of teaching.

Showing movies in class is a waste of time and a “cop-out” on the part of the teacher. It does seem, initially, that using class time to watch a movie is a “waste” since students could be assigned the movie as homework. Currently, in my principles courses, I show one movie in class and assign a second to watch at home. But there are significant benefits of watching a movie in class together.

First, I am sure that the students present have actually seen the movie, rather than simply read reviews of it, and have seen it under less potentially distracting circumstances than a home environment. Second, showing the movie in class allows me to emphasize the concepts when they are fresh in students’ minds. I use a lecture-viewing-discussion mode: first introducing the concepts via lecture, and then following up the movie with discussion questions. Third, one of the motivations for this project for me was cost savings, for both the students and instructor. There are certainly economies of scale in renting one movie for a class of 30-40 students rather than having each of them rent their own copy!

Discussion groups take too long and students will simply chat and waste time. Many people believe that anything other than giving lectures (and exams) constitutes a waste of valuable class time. I used to be one of those people. It’s only as I became gradually convinced that my lectures would be more effective when interspersed with other forms of learning activities, as well as breaks, that I could let go of the idea that I was “wasting time” in class. Learning by discussion group does take a lot of time. But, talking through the concepts in their groups and drawing graphs on their own gives students a sense of mastery over the material that cannot be obtained from simply listening to a lecture and watching the instructor draw on the board. For example, in teaching supply and demand shifts, I assign groups to different markets and, using their textbooks as their guide, have them explore the reasons why demand and supply would shift in their particular markets. They then draw their graphs on the board, and we discuss them.

I agree with you about introducing other learning styles. But why does it have to be done in class? Can’t students get the same benefits by doing homework? Maybe they can. It largely depends on whether we can get students to work in groups outside of class. This would work, perhaps, in a residential school where the students see each other regularly outside of class time. It does not work so well in the non-residential, commuter based community college where I teach. The potential for free riding in these groups is obviously also higher than in a class-supervised session.

If my students are watching movies and discussing concepts in group, what is my role as a teacher? Haven’t I outsourced myself out of a job? Probably not. Changing my teaching style has required me to redefine my teaching role as more of a facilitator and less of a lecturer. It’s also redefined my idea of teaching as less authority-figure based and more peer driven. Will students continue to respect me if I step down from the blackboard and sit down next to them? I think they will. I have noticed, also, that students seem more willing to ask questions in class once they have interacted in the small groups, and I see this as a very positive development. They are also very enthusiastic about suggesting additional movies for teaching economics.

Suggested Films

I have designed a one-semester course based entirely on movies (to be offered at Northern Virginia Community College, Manassas Campus in Spring 2006). I currently choose movies for my principles classes from a list I have formulated (see box), using one or two per semester to illustrate particular concepts.

For example, for the past two semesters, I have used the film *Dirty Pretty Things* to supplement the lectures on supply and demand and the market system in my “Principles of Microeconomics” class. *Dirty Pretty Things* shows illegal immigrants to London engaging in different kinds of Black Market activities such as prostitution, underground sweatshops, and, most starkly, sale of organs in exchange for money and passports. This film is an excellent portrayal of the inexorable workings of an amoral market – and illustration of supply and demand in the grisly business of body parts. The main character, Okwe (brilliantly played by Chiwetel Ejiofor), is an illegal immigrant to London who discovers that the hotel he works in is trafficking in body parts. The manager, Juan, who profits from this trade, informs him with cheerful callousness, “I am in the business of happiness.” According to Juan, sale of body parts is a free exchange, and everyone gets what he wants.

Dirty Pretty Things shows the underground economy of illegal immigrants in gritty detail, with everything from sex to kidneys on the table (so to speak). It illustrates the relentlessness of the market in a striking way and allows students to wrestle with issues of legality versus economic imperatives. A note of warning: the movie is quite graphic and has some disturbing scenes of botched operations as well as semi-explicit sex scenes. I would still highly recommend it, since these scenes are not

gratuitous but an integral part of the film, though instructors may want to offer particularly sensitive students another option.

Mondays in the Sun (2003) shows the struggles of six unemployed dockworkers. All of them react differently to their enforced idleness: some with anger, some with depression, and some with determination to find a new job, any job. The movie highlights the pain of unemployment and the myriad ways it eats into people's self-esteem. The storyline provides an excellent context for discussion of the economic and social costs of unemployment, the impacts of globalization (the Spanish shipyard has closed in part due to Korean competition), and the debate over voluntary versus involuntary unemployment. I have shown this movie in "Principles of Macroeconomics" following chapters on unemployment, globalization, or labor market issues. *Mondays in the Sun* is set in Spain and is in Spanish with subtitles.

Roger and Me (1989) addresses similar unemployment themes from a perspective more familiar to American students: massive plant closings and layoffs by General Motors that devastated Flint, Michigan. The storyline is that Flint native (and director of this movie) Michael Moore wants to question the GM chairman, Roger Smith, to find out why GM is cutting back employment in Michigan in spite of its considerable profits. In his search for the elusive Smith, Moore meets a host of other characters and documents the considerable economic and social costs through personal testimonies by former GM workers.

A bit surprisingly, the romantic comedy *You've Got Mail* (1998) starring Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks, can be used to illustrate key economic points in a way that students can easily comprehend. Economies of scale, the costs of monopolistic competition and product differentiation, the tradeoffs between efficiency and variety, the impacts of the trend towards "McDonaldization," and the many ways – from the profound to the mundane – that technology changes our lives are some of the topics for discussion.

I have shown *You've Got Mail* (accompanied by protesting groans from male students who insisted that it's a "chick flick") in "Principles of Microeconomics" following material on costs of production, perfect competition, monopoly and monopolistic competition, and oligopoly. Students should be familiar with the concept of economies of scale and have already covered the material on differences in efficiency of different market structures.

Assessing their Learning

My website contains a sample of discussion questions that can be used for class debate as well as writing assignments. (Visit <http://www.nvcc.edu/home/lbhadra>) I have used these questions to assign short response papers and received some thoughtful essays.

Previously, when I assigned current events papers, asking my students to find an article in the news and discuss the economic principles contained in it, I received much paraphrasing and an absolute minimum of original thought. However, in these film-related papers, students seem to feel more confident having an opinion on economic principles shown in movies, possibly because they have understood the material better in this form. Perhaps, too, the content may be more memorable, or their learning may be reinforced by the multimodal nature of movies. But, whatever the case, students seem to feel much more confident in venturing economic opinions on Hollywood rather than Wall Street.

Sample Discussion Questions for *You've Got Mail* (1998)

One can argue that monopolistic competition is at a cost disadvantage both vis-à-vis perfect competition (more productively efficient) and oligopoly (more economies of scale). (Explain using graphs and/or words.) What then explains the persistence of this market form?

Explain the tradeoff between diversity/variety and productive efficiency inherent in monopolistic competition using examples from the movie. (Again, you can use graphs and/or words.)

What kinds of economies of scale do Fox and Sons Books enjoy? What kinds of diseconomies of scale does it suffer from?

"Economies of scope" occur when it is cheaper to produce two products together rather than separately. Can you think of any examples of economies of scope (from the movie or elsewhere)?

At the beginning of the movie, Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) is dating Frank Navasky (Greg Kinnear). Frank refuses to use a computer, preferring his typewriter, and gains fame by writing an article about how technology is ruining lives. Summarize his argument. Do you agree or disagree with him? Do you think that the (largely economic) savings from technological improvements are outweighed by its (largely social) costs? How has your life changed (improved/worsened) as a result of specific technologies?

One of the key technologies of this movie is, of course, email. How has email and Internet use changed your life? Explain how the use of email specifically and the Internet in general lowers costs. What kind of spillover effects (positive or negative)

do you think are associated with use of the Internet?

If “Mom and Pop” stores like the Shop Around the Corner are going to compete with oligopolistic giants like Fox and Sons books, consumers will have to be willing to pay for their diversity. Are you willing to pay for this? How often do you stop at a privately owned restaurant, coffee shop, or retail store rather than at McDonald’s, Olive Garden, Starbucks, or Wal-Mart? (If you’re interested in these topics, you may want to read *The McDonaldization of Society* by George Ritzer published by Pine Forge Press, 2000.)

Works Cited

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Ritzer, George. *The McDonaldization of Society*. Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Pine Forge Press, 2000.

Notes

1. This proposal was partly inspired by Leet and Houser (2003); however, the films suggested by Leet and Houser (2003) are mainly classics and documentaries with the majority from the 1920s-1960s. My course design uses more modern films, as well as expanding the list of topics covered through film.
 2. Interesting, the grant guidelines did not restrict applicants to this subject, but were much broader and called for proposals related to the development of teaching aids, research, equipment, or other service projects that would be beneficial to the College and/or campus where the applicant teaches.
 3. The material in this section is drawn from the website <http://www.vark-learn.com> .
 4. 30.8 percent of the population tests as VARK (meaning they learn using all four styles), 14.6 as bimodal, and 12.8 as tri-modal.
 5. I also took the test myself, and not surprisingly, assessed as strongly read-write.
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